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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RPO DUBAI 000045

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [IR](#) [KPAO](#) [SCUL](#)
SUBJECT: STAR TV TO LAUNCH PERSIAN LANGUAGE ENTERTAINMENT CHANNEL
FROM DUBAI

REF: A. RPO DUBAI 0040; B. RPO DUBAI 0044

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CLASSIFIED BY: Amy Madsen, Acting Director, Iran Regional
Presence Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: STAR Group (a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp) intends to launch a Persian-dubbed satellite entertainment channel from Dubai in November or December that will target audiences in Iran and the region. STAR officials told the Charge d'Affaires in Abu Dhabi, Dubai Consul General, and IRPOffs during meetings on July 14 and August 3 that they received a Department of Treasury OFAC license for the channel, which is a commercial venture primarily intended to provide entertainment and advertising to the untapped Iranian market. STAR aims to avoid political sensitivities by only broadcasting family-friendly content. STAR does not consider other Dubai-based Persian-language channels as competitors, and their main concern is to secure agreement with the Dubai Government to operate. The Charge and Consul General recommended STAR mitigate any potential sensitivities with UAE officials by stressing the business nature of the channel, and STAR's representatives subsequently reported to IRPOffs that after meeting with Dubai officials they believed their proposal would be approved. STAR's channel, which might include coverage of US-Iran cultural engagement, likely will be popular among Iranian viewers who seek alternatives to state-run and existing expatriate channels, especially programs that are appropriate for the entire family. End summary.

STAR Channel Aims to Reach Untapped Iran Market

12. (C) STAR Group officials Joe Welch (Senior Vice President of Government Affairs) and Sanjay Das (Executive Vice President of Strategy and Development) met with the Charge, PAO, and IRPOffs in Abu Dhabi July 14, and separately with IRPOffs August 5. Welch, Das, and STAR Chief Executive Officer Paul Aiello also met with the Consul General and ConGen PAO in Dubai August 3.

13. (C) STAR's new channel would join two entertainment channels currently broadcasting Persian-language content from Dubai, Persian Music Channel and MBC Persia (ref A). STAR's channel would be a joint venture with Moby Group, a media development organization directed by the Mohseni brothers in Afghanistan that includes the Tolo TV brand. STAR officials said they expect to invest \$15 million in facilities in Dubai Media City and to employ approximately 40 staff, and will dub the programs

in Kabul. STAR plans to broadcast the channel via Hotbird and Arabsat, making it widely available to regional viewers with satellite TV access.

14. (C) STAR officials stressed that their aim in launching the free-to-air channel is to make a profit by advertising within the regional Persian-speaking market. However, the primary target is Iranian domestic and diaspora audiences, given their untapped commercial appeal. Programming would be geared toward women and family audiences aged 18 to 34, with advertising focusing primarily on women as STAR officials claimed they are the primary purchasers and decision-makers. STAR did not conduct market research in Iran, but believed Iranian's interests and habits are similar to those of Asian audiences. IRPOff recommended STAR conduct focus groups to determine what topics are of interest to Iranians, however, STAR preferred to hire an Iranian diaspora female to advise on programming.

Channel Would Avoid Politically Sensitive Content

15. (C) STAR's CEO told IRPOffs the channel would provide "responsible, thoughtful entertainment content" and would not show news programs. The channel would air 8 hours of programming daily from 4 pm to 12 pm, which would be repeated, to include American sitcoms such as Seinfeld and Friends, children's programs, telenovelas, educational programs potentially by National Geographic, and at least one hour of drama programs. STAR would not initially broadcast sports or music content given the high cost of rights to these programs. STAR wants the content to appeal to the entire family, and aims to avoid programs that parents might deem inappropriate for their children. The Dubai team would edit the program content, with Das serving as Chief Operating Officer.

16. (C) STAR eventually would like to produce content exclusively

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for its Iranian audiences, such as telenovelas or historical programs, and would consider using Iranian local coverage or employees (STAR Group received an OFAC license from the US Treasury Department to operate the channel). However, their first priority is to establish STAR's brand among Persian-speaking viewers. While the officials noted there are no Nielsen ratings in the region to determine viewership, they plan to launch a web site for the channel and measure interest based on the number of visitors to the site. STAR officials said they cannot advertise the channel inside Iran, and expect promotion there to be by word of mouth.

Not Concerned With Competition

17. (C) STAR officials appeared unconcerned with the few Persian-language channels broadcasting into Iran and did not view them as competitors. They described their channel as unique because it would be the only channel providing a mix of general entertainment content. They claimed that their drama programming, for example, would draw audiences more regularly than MBC's movie channel as viewers would tune in weekly to follow a story-line.

UAE Government Likely to Support the Channel

18. (C) STAR officials, in their meetings with the Charge and Consul General, seemed most concerned that Iranian officials might complain to the UAE and pressure them to stop the channel, similar to the temporary closure of Dubai-based Geo TV channels broadcasting to Pakistan in November 2007. Mission believes that while Dubai officials might object to news programming, they are unlikely to object to a channel broadcasting entertainment content. It was recommended that STAR be direct

with officials in Dubai regarding their intentions for the channel, emphasizing that the channel is a business venture to provide entertainment content. Post believes it would be important to address any possible suspicions that the channel has a hidden political agenda.

¶9. (C) The STAR officials, after meeting with Executive Director of Media at Dubai Media City Dr. Amina Al Rustamani, told IRPOffs on August 5 that the advice they received was "spot on."

STAR's explanation of the channel as a business venture resonated with Dr. Al Rustamani, and she did not think Dubai officials would object to the channel. STAR officials said she seemed unconcerned about the possibility of Iran complaining to the UAE, and was reassured by STAR's established brand, their intention to broadcast entertainment content, and the OFAC license approval for the channel's operations. She said there are a number of applications for Persian-language channels pending that the Dubai Government would not approve. STAR officials believed this was because the channels were not as established.

STAR Interested to Promote Positive US-Iran Relations

¶10. (C) Responding to IRPOffs question about including coverage on the channel of instances of positive engagement between Iran and the US, the STAR officials thought this was a good idea and that they might be able to incorporate such content. They also expressed interest in partnering with IRPO on cultural projects, such as the recent documentary film festival supported partly by IIP funding in Dubai, where STAR could be involved while also promoting their channel (ref B).

¶11. (C) Comment: STAR's channel likely will be of interest to Iranian satellite TV viewers, and may be more popular than the recently launched MBC Persia (a movie channel) because it aims to provide multiple entertainment programs appropriate for the entire family. STAR's channel is unique and seems well-placed to fill Iranian TV viewers' desire for Persian-language entertainment beyond the dominant state-run TV programs and limited number of expatriate channels, some of which Iranians view as out-of-touch because they include anti-regime political content and presenters who were popular in Iran thirty years ago. The possibility of USG/STAR cooperation is interesting but would have to be handled very carefully, not only for the sake of STAR but also for IRPO's local profile and UAEG sensitivities. End Comment.

¶12. (U) This cable was cleared by Embassy Abu Dhabi and

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Consulate General Dubai.
MADSEN